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The Impact of the Sports Car

Our Love Affair With Sports Cars

Why do so many find sports cars irresistible? Few objects inspire the emotional attachment that sports cars do among auto enthusiasts. There are always dedicated fans of almost every technology, but sports car fans band together in clubs, spend a significant percentage of their free time preoccupied with their car, and may even begin to create a self-definition that seems to be centered upon their favorite auto.

There is something about sports cars that makes them uniquely attractive to many drivers. Of course, it would be impossible to isolate exactly what it is about a well-designed sports car that engenders such attachment, but there are some factors that would logically contribute to the commonly seen love affair between men and their sports cars.

Initially, it seems as if much of the attraction is grounded in symbolism. Sports cars have long been portrayed as sources of freedom. Drivers are left unencumbered by the limitations of other automobiles are seen as having a uniquely free and flexible life on the open road. This notion of freedom is intensified when one considers convertible sports car offerings. In such circumstances the driver is not boxed in like others. He can tackle any road while being completely open to the elements.

Additionally, the allure of sports cars lies in their innovative technology. We live in a world that worships at the altar of technological advances. The sports car is a moving amalgamation of technical expertise. Sports cars are a bundling of technological miracles. From aerodynamic styling to compact yet powerful engines, they represent the cutting edge of technological design. In a society entranced by technology and innovation, the sports car has an iconic appeal that is difficult to equal.

Sports cars also represent the flipside to our technological obsession. Although we, as a society, crave more and better tech we also fear these developments will diminish our humanity. Some have even argued we have an underlying fear of losing control over our own advances.

The sports car simultaneously represents our technological prowess while reassuring us we retain dominion over our creation. Sports cars are built to respond the driver. In fact, they are sold as being the most responsive cars available. The driver is left in ultimate control. Man creates the new technology and harnesses it. It is the perfect version of our technological dream in action.

Finally, the sports car appeals to man's desire to reassert his strength in a world that no longer requires physical prowess. Humanity has grown softer and the need for violent power to function successfully has been reduced to near zero. The sports car provides an alternative means of expressing whatever hard-wired tendencies toward strength and prowess that may be lurking in the deep recesses of the human mind.

The sports car is an embodiment, after all, of the human physical traits once needed for survival in leaner times. Speed and power are combined and become a proxy body for the driver placed behind the wheel.

The sports car, it would seem, is a perfect object of affection. It allows us to explore our concept of freedom. It shows us our continual technological advancement while simultaneously reassuring us that we can keep our new technologies under our control. Meanwhile, the sports car acts a proxy body for us to express a seemingly instinctive need for demonstrating physical prowess.

Sports Cars: A Global Phenomenon

There is a tendency to view sports cars through one's own cultural prism. Americans may reflect upon that little convertible Corvette with its chrome rack on the trunk. An Italian may be partial to a tiny Fiat Spider or a more upscale Ferrari. Germans will wax poetic about the once-famed Bugatti and the other spectacular designs that have emerged from Stuttgart.

A Japanese advocate will point to fast and furious Mitsubishi Lancers with Evo packages. The Englishman will espouse the virtues of the MG and remember his old Triumph. Every nation that manufactures cars, it would seem, fancies itself at the forefront of the sports car industry.

The history of sports cars predates the mass production of automobiles. Sports cars were originally just that, cars used for sport. In races and rallies small design teams and manufacturers would try to best one another to demonstrate their project's superiority. This phenomenon was not isolated in any one geographic area. Throughout Europe and the Americas sports car enthusiasts competed seriously with one another, testing the limits of car-builders and drivers alike.

The post-war era ushered in a new generation of sports cars. Once the high-priced and hard to obtain toys of diehard enthusiasts and only the most wealthy, the sports car found itself outfitted with additional functionality and a price tag that made it more accessible to the average driver. The rallies and races, of course, continued. In fact, their popularity increased as major producers attempted to show the world they were the leaders in sports car quality.

Smaller, often private, races and contests soon supplemented the still-popular large, organized events. In the U.S., drag racing pitted cars and their mechanically inclined owners against one another on everything from country roads to city thoroughfares. Europeans were likely to test one another on winding country roads. The sports car was no longer the domain of the expert alone.

As time passed, the reconstructed Japanese economy found itself at the forefront of an automotive revolution. America's concern with gas prices made the economy car an attractive niche for Japanese manufacturers, who seemed unrivaled in producing fuel-efficient, reliable small autos. Eventually, the Japanese entered the sports car fray, as well. Their understanding of reliability combined with great engineering talents produced many competitive sports cars.

Although there have been only a few nations who have become new automobile producers over the past few decades, the sports car phenomena continues to grow into new areas. A perfect example of the universal appeal of sports cars can now be seen in Saudi Arabia.

Saudis are buying more sports cars than ever before. Maseratis have a unique appeal in Saudi Arabia, as customers seek a blend of sports car performance and luxury. The elegant high-end Quattroporte is making a stir in Saudi Arabia as more and more younger Saudi drivers seek out a sportier alternative to the cars that have thus far lined Arabian streets.

From turn-of-the-century cross-country rallies to today's wealthiest areas of oil-rich Saudi Arabia, sports cars are coveted possession. They are not the unique love of any nation or culture and truly possess a unique global popularity.

Cultural differences remain strong even in today's more global culture. Islamic and traditionally Christian nations may not always seem eye to eye on a variety of issues. The French don't always embrace U.S. foreign policy. Less serious, the English still like their fish fried and served with chips while the Japanese may prefer a dinner of sushi.

We are a world of different people with different perspectives on any number of things. Nonetheless, it appears as though one great unifying trait that stretches over oceans and across continents is the love of drivers for a sports car.

The Golden Age of American Sports Cars

Throughout the 1960s, American manufacturers created some of history's most memorable sports cars. Sports cars are certainly a global phenomenon, but during the 1960s, the United States truly made its mark on the industry. From the small traditional sports cars of the early 60s to the muscle cars from late in the decade, the 1960s were certainly the Golden Age for American Sports cars.

Many examples of superior sports cars can be found when looking over the output of Detroit automakers during the 1960s. Three, however, still stand out as true sports car classics and awesome exemplars of one of the most productive sports car production eras in history:

1961 Ford Thunderbird

Ford Motor Company launched its Thunderbird line in 1955. The small sports car, often available as a convertible, gained instant recognition and solid following among sports car enthusiasts.

After several years, Ford opted to update and redesign its popular sports car entry. In 1961 the Thunderbird boasted an all-new body design featuring a more pointed front end and the addition of small fins about above its trademark round taillights. Four headlights were the norm and in non-convertible models the top was modified slightly.

The outside of the Thunderbird wasn't the only part of the vehicle to be changed. Inside, a curving dash was installed as well as a new innovation, the swing-away steering column.

In addition to the design changes, there were real mechanical improvements, as well. A 390 c.i. V8 engine completed the Thunderbird package. The new power plant was capable of producing nearly 350 hp.

The 1961 Thunderbird helped usher in the 1960s sports car movement in America. These cars were the precursors to what would later be called muscle cars. They remained true to their traditional sports car routes while beginning to grow and to offer amenities not historically available in roadsters and other small vehicles.

1963 Corvette Stingray

The Corvette was Chevrolet's entry into the sports car market. Originally a tiny, underperforming two-seater, the Corvette morphed into a real competitor for the Thunderbird with the addition of a V8 engine and three speed manual transmission early in its run.

In 1963, Chevrolet again found itself having to take on a superior Thunderbird. The T-Bird's 1961 redesign left the Corvette slightly outdated and Chevy design teams felt a need to come up with something special. They did just that.

The 1963 Corvette Stingray featured a sleek new demand that pushed sales to record levels. In addition to the body changes, there were a series of mechanical upgrades, as well.

Automobile critics lauded the Corvette as an engineering wonder. For the first time, even the most European-biased sports car enthusiasts were compelled to admit the United States was producing truly world-class sports cars. The Stingray boasted a level of international credibility never-before bestowed on an American car.

1965 Impala SS

Chevrolet was not, however, content with maintaining only its Corvette line. The introduction of the Pontiac GTO and other high-performance larger sports cars led to the construction of the prototypical muscle car: the 1965 Impala SS.

Originally introduced as a premium car with mass appeal in the late 50s, by 1965, the Impala had been transformed into a performance marvel.

Nearly a quarter of a million 1965 Impalas were sold, in large measure due to the high-speed performance of the Chevrolet 396 c.i. big block engine.

The success of the 1965 Impala SS heralded the beginning of the muscle car era and is a prime example of fine American sports car developments in the 1960s.

These three cars are perfect examples of the products produced by U.S. automakers during the sports car crazed 1960s. All combined function and high-end performance into seamless packages and were well received both domestically and internationally.

The 1960s may very well represent the peak of U.S. creativity and design quality for sports cars. These three vehicles provide a wonderful overview of this great era in American sports car design.

The World's Fastest Sports Car

Many things go into making a car a sports car, but chief among the factors that separate standard autos from sports cars is speed. Speed is not the sole measurement by which a sports car can or should be judged, but great acceleration and top end speed are factors that are always considered by sports car enthusiasts. While there are cars that can reach 60 mph quicker, the overall fastest production sports car in the world is the McLaren F1.

The McLaren holds all known records for speed among publicly available, street legal sports cars. Its 6.1liter V12 engine (which was designed by BMW) provides an awesome 627 bhp. To put that number in perspective, 627 bhp is more than double the power output of the engine found in one of the world's most famous sports cars, the Astin Martin DB5.

Various sources have tested the McLaren F1. All have been able to push the vehicle to speeds in excess of 230 miles per hour. Some have reached speeds over 240 miles per hour in the F1.

The world's fastest sports car is quick off the line, too. It can go from a standstill to 60 miles per hour in only 3.1 seconds, an amazing clip. It took only slightly more than 6 seconds for the car to achieve 100 mile per hour rates from a dead stop. The McLaren F1's body was constructed from carbon fibers; an automotive innovation and it boasted gull-wings similar to the Lamborghini Countach and Delorean DMC12.

The F1 was originally offered in 1993. Production seems to have stopped in 1998. According to one noted source, only around 100 McLaren F1's were ever produced--and only 65 were designed for road use, making it not only the fastest sports car ever, but one of the most rare, as well. It is considered among the most exotic of all exotic sports cars.

The 100 F1's in existence are sure to fetch more than their original price tag if offered for sale today. That is of particular interest because the McLaren F1 was not cheap to begin with. The limited production sports car listed at one million dollars new.

The car's seats were custom molded to fit their owner's physique perfectly and every purchaser was given a custom made Tag Hueur watch engraved with the F1's chassis number. Purchasers were also rewarded with a gold-plated titanium tool kit. As of the late 1990s, there were only seven F1's in the United States, two of which were maintained in Ralph Lauren's private collection.

The McLaren F1 is a notable sports car for a variety of reasons. It's rare nature, high cost, unique story, construction innovations and gorgeous design alone would make it a noteworthy piece of automotive history. When one also considers the massive power supplied by the V12 power plant and the resulting acceleration and speed, the McLaren F1 is elevated to the status of legend.

In a world that values speed almost above all else, the McLaren F1 was, and remains, the fastest.

The World's Most Famous Sports Car

In 1959, Ian Fleming penned Goldfinger and inserted his secret agent hero, James Bond, into a 1959 Astin Martin DB-3. There was a lag between the story's release, however, and the motion picture that shared its name. By the time Sean Connery was prepared to take out Goldfinger, the DB-3 seemed dated. James Bond got behind the wheel of a 1963 Astin Martin DB-5 and made it the most famous sports car in the world.

Sports cars are wonderful, but the Bond car had a few special features that made it even more appealing to moviegoers. It was outfitted with bulletproof glass, machine guns, and other assorted gadgetry. Its understated color scheme fit the Bond character perfectly, and the car's role in the film afforded it significant screen time. Within a few years, there would be no better-known sports car in the world.

The Astin Martin DB-5 was a fine car in its own right, but the popularity of Goldfinger and Thunderball (in which it also appeared) elevated it to a global phenomena. Even today, after countless intervening James Bond movies, when someone says they want a "Bond car," the mind races back to the DB-5 made famous over forty years ago.

An American eventually purchased the original Bond car and kept it in superb condition, using it primarily for special appearances and events. In 1999, the DB-5 was stolen from outside a Boca Raton, Florida airport. The would-be thief didn't blend into traffic well in the Astin Martin and was apprehended.

The remarkable performance of James Bond's DB-5 was no doubt aided by Q and the other technicians at headquarters. Movie feats such as outracing a Ferrari were beyond the limitations of the real DB-5. Although a fine sports car, the DB-5 was really designed more as a touring vehicle than as a speedster.

It possessed a six-cylinder engine that topped out at approximately 280 bhp. Its top-end speed was approximately 140 mph, and it took over 8 seconds to achieve speeds in excess of 60 mph from start.

Although the DB-5 was by no means considered a clunker, it was not the top performer in its class. Ferrari, Jaguar and others were producing sports cars at the same time that outperformed the Astin Martin by a considerable margin. These cars, however, faded into history as the uniquely British styling of the DB-5 and its use by one her majesty's best secret service agents elevated it to worldwide popularity.

The ever-popular DB-5 has been reproduced countless time in miniature, with the famed Danbury mint still offering a small-scale replica of the famous sports car. Items relating to the DB-5 are popular crossover collectibles, coveted by fans of film and British sports cars alike.

There are many other famous sports cars. The Ferrari Testarossa from Miami Vice, Steve McQueen's Mustang from Bullitt, the Spider in which James Dean met his fate and other sports cars all share places in our collective memories. But the Astin Martin DB-5, propelled by two incredibly successful films and attractive in its own right, remains the world's most famous sports car.

Three Amazing Private Sports Car Collections

There are literally thousands of sports car enthusiasts who have amassed impressive automobile collections. However, some collections stand out as truly amazing. Three collections, in particular, are very noteworthy and command the attention of any sports car fan.

Toad Hall

Toad Hall, the private collection of Bill Putman, features an assortment of sports cars dating back to the turn of the century. Although Putman's collection emphasizes automobiles from British manufacturers, the products of manufacturers from other nations are also well represented.

At the Toad Hall collection, an enthusiast can marvel at historically important cars from Bentley, Lotus, Datsun, and many other makers. Even though the collection is diverse, all of the automobiles do share one common characteristic: every automobile shown at Toad Hall is painted red!

Toad Hall takes its name from the manor that plays a prominent role in the children's literary classic *The Wind in the Willow*, which was later made into a popular Disney film. One need not, however, be a fan of children's books to enjoy the masterfully assembled collection of automobiles at Toad Hall.

The LeMay Collection

Tacoma, Washington, in the United States can call itself home to the world's largest collection of automobiles. The Guinness Book of World's Records has certified the LeMay exhibit as the single largest known automobile collection.

Featuring over 3,000 automobiles and several thousand additional pieces of interesting artifacts from American history. If one were to name an interesting or desirable sports car, it would likely be found in LeMay's massive collection. In addition to sports cars, the LeMay collection also displays other transportation from America's past, including fire trucks and ambulances. Almost an automotive Smithsonian, the full collection cannot realistically be viewed in a single visit.

The LeMay began in the 1940s when an area waste-hauling magnate started scouring the area for interesting vehicles. Now, almost 60 years later, the collection has become a highly frequented area tourist attraction and plans are currently underway to build a new permanent home for the automobile-lover's paradise near the Tacoma Dome.

The Ralph Lauren Collection

American icon Ralph Lauren is well known as a fashion designer and incredibly successful business mogul. He is also a passionate automobile collector and has made his amazing collection available for public viewing.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts displayed the Lauren collection to the public. According to notes made available at the exhibition, Lauren began accumulating automobiles in the early 60s. Although he did not have plans to build a collection his passion for fine cars eventually led him to amass a great assortment of fascinating vehicles.

Lauren's eye for good design transferred nicely from the fashion world to the automotive world. He gathered cars noted for their beauty, as well as for their performance. Rare Bugattis and Ferraris, for instance, pepper the collection

Performance, however, is still evident in the collection. The most recent addition to the Lauren collection, for instance, is a remarkable 1996 McLaren F1 car known to easily exceed 225 mph.

Additionally, many of the cars in the Lauren collection have a special link to American history. Lauren is fond of cars with celebrity histories. A Porsche 500 Spider, the very car in which actor James Dean was killed, is featured in the collection. A Jaguar XK 120 Alloy Roadster from 1950, a car once enjoyed by one of the original Hollywood super couples, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, is there, too.

There are many amazing automobile collections. Every major metropolitan area, it seems, boasts at least one collection of note. Nonetheless, some collections stand out among the crowd. Any automotive enthusiast would be thrilled to set eyes on Toad Hall, to visit the extensive LeMay collection, or to marvel at Ralph Lauren's private automobile collection.

Three Sports Car Events You Cannot Miss

Sports car enthusiasts have thousands of exciting events from which to choose every year. From the Atlantic City auctions to the Muscle Car ranch, there are a variety of entertaining and informative happenings for the sports car scene. One can choose from any number of swap meets, rallies, meetings, auctions and car shows locally and throughout the country.

Among the plethora of available events, some are truly can't-miss experiences for sports car aficionados. Here are three such events:

SCCA National Convention

The Sports Car Club of America holds its national convention annually, generally in February. The event is billed as an opportunity to "visit, celebrate and learn." Considering the high-quality membership and several organized presentations, the convention is likely to provide a fantastic opportunity for any sports car buff to do all three. The annual SCCA Convention offers an unrivaled opportunity to rub shoulders with the most knowledgeable of sports car buffs and

giants in the field.

In addition to a full roster of exciting events, the Sports Car Club of America convention also serves as the organization's opportunity to induct true greats in the sports car field into its hall of fame.

While the SCCA Convention may not be as glitzy or glamorous as a trip to the Orient to see the latest high-tech autos, it does offer such a unique opportunity to gain information and know-how that it simply cannot be overlooked.

Tokyo Auto Show

For those who want an unforgettable experience, attendance at the Tokyo auto show should do the trick. Interested in seeing the very latest concept cars and sports car prototypes? The sprawling Tokyo car show is the premiere event for those showcasing the latest developments from the sports car world.

Featuring unique presentations (often by creatively costumed models) of new cars, displays demonstrating the newest technologies, and set against a digital, futuristic backdrop, this giant annual event is one car show on everyone's short list of important events.

Those accustomed to local car shows at their metropolitan expo center will be amazed at the production put on by the Tokyo car show. It is an automotive event like no other, held in an exotic location.

The North American International Auto Show

Sports car fans who are unprepared or unable to travel internationally, might want to consider the famous North American International Auto Show. For many of us, the city of Detroit is synonymous with the idea of autos, so it should come as no surprise that the event occurs in the Big Three's own backyard.

The North American International Auto Show is billed as the largest auto show in the world and it features almost every new car on the market--including sports cars. Additionally, great efforts are made to show attendees what they can expect from future automobiles. Concept cars, prototypes and other future-focused vehicles are displayed and demonstrated.

Anyone with an interest in the latest sports cars--and the future of the sports car scene--is sure to be thrilled by a visit to the annual North American International Auto show in Detroit.

With so many choices, it can be hard for sports car fans to decide which events they should make every effort to attend and which ones they can miss. There is no way to make every event, so one must make choices. Three of the premiere events, however, should make it onto every sports car buff's short list of must-see. These spectacular events offer unthinkable informative and entertainment value for any fan of high-performance vehicles.

Five Great Sports Car Activities

If you are sports car enthusiast, your hobby affords you many opportunities to take in entertaining events and activities. Here are five activities and events that any sports car enthusiast will love:

The Atlantic City Cars Auction

This annual event in the eastern U.S. gambling Mecca is more than a simple auto auction. Over 1,000 cars are displayed and there are additional activities scheduled throughout the course of the event including a car expo and swap meet.

The auction claims to have turned away more than 200 last year cars simply due to a lack of space. The event has grown to unprecedented proportions and provides sports car enthusiasts with an opportunity to both view and purchase the sports cars of their dreams.

The last Atlantic City Cars Auction saw more than 200 U.S. muscle cars alone sold. Looking through the sales roster, one can find a variety of unique and interesting sports cars. Everything from a 1953 MG replicar to a 1986 Porsche 911 were sold at the last event.

The Atlantic City auction usually occurs every February and is an amazing activity for a sports car fan!

Corvettes at Carlisle

Carlisle, Pennsylvania, hosts an annual Corvette aficionado get together. Usually held in the later summer, Corvettes at Carlisle is a dream come true for any Corvette fan.

Activities are diverse: there are forums to discuss particular Corvette issues. There are swap meets. A parade of Corvettes occurs every year. There are awards and judging of Corvettes in a variety of categories. There are even organized Corvette trivia challenges and a cook-off to see which Corvette lover is the best chef.

Corvettes at Carlisle is a can't-miss event for all Corvette owners, and a remarkably fun multi-day event for any sports car enthusiast.

Tokyo Auto Show

There may be a sense of fun and relaxed camaraderie at an event like Corvettes at Carlisle. The Tokyo Auto Show, on the other hand, offers a hyper-kinetic experience that is likely to produce jaw-dropping reactions on the part of attendees.

The Tokyo Auto Show is a popular place for the unveiling of new sports car prototypes and concept cars. With the Japanese manufacturers being on the cutting edge of new sports car design and development, it's no surprise that the popularity of this annual international car show continues to grow.

In 2005, the Tokyo Auto Show unveiled scores of new vehicles and prototypes including

glimpses of new sports cars--some of which won't hit the market for another two years.

While many sports car events celebrate the past, the Tokyo Auto Show charges into the future with new sports car displays and a focus on automotive technology.

Muscle Car Ranch

Muscle Car Ranch really is a ranch. Located outside of Chickasha, Oklahoma, the Muscle Car Ranch features an annual gathering and swap meet for muscle car enthusiasts.

The event is widely recognized as the premiere event of its type and is often called "The Woodstock of Swap Meets." The description is apt, as thousands of muscle sports car enthusiasts will spend multiple days in Oklahoma to gather around their favorite subject: muscle cars. Every year, The Muscle Car Ranch provides live entertainment, often in the form of well-known classic rock and roll bands.

Muscle Car Ranch features numerous organized activities for sports car fans, as well as a great chance for socializing.

Middle East International Auto Show

You don't have to go to rural America or the heart of Japan to find great sports car events. You can also head to one of world's richest nations, the Middle Eastern country of Dubai to check out the Middle East International Auto Show.

The show has grown each and every year since its inception and is likely to continue to post higher marks in popularity. One of the Dubai shows claims to fame is its ability to attract incredibly affluent buyers and sports car fans to the show. As such, one can expect to see many of the world's finest sports cars and most exotic sports cars at the Dubai show.

Being a sports car fan provides you with some great entertainment options: Whether you want to play some blackjack in Atlantic City and check out the auction, enter a high-speed digital underworld in Tokyo, hang out with friends in rural Pennsylvania, rub shoulders with the world's most wealthy in Dubai, or catch some rock music and muscle cars in Oklahoma, you can do it!

Three Sports Car Innovators to Remember

The history of American sports cars is the story not only of machines, but also of the men who made and drove them. There have been many key players in the development of the modern sports car, but some stand out as truly significant figures.

Among those innovators to remember are Alexander Winton, Zora Arkus-Duntov, and John DeLorean. Each made a lasting impression on the sports car scene.

Alexander Winton

Alexander Winton was the first truly successful automotive magnate in the United States. His cars participated and excelled in virtually every major racing and touring event of the late 1890s and early 1900s. Winton cars were perceived as the model of American automotive engineering.

Winton's success and belief in his vehicles led him to accept a challenge from an upstart from Detroit named Henry Ford. In a much-ballyhooed 1901 contest, Ford and Winton squared off in one-on-one race.

Winton's Sweepstakes racecar suffered from mechanical problems during the contest and his two-cylinder, 28 horsepower racer finished a distant second to Ford, who found his career revitalized after the publicized victory.

Despite often being remembered as the man who lost to Ford, Alexander Winton was a true American sports car pioneer and laid the groundwork for many manufacturers who followed in his footsteps.

Zora Arkus-Duntov

After World War II, American manufacturers began to produce readily available sports cars, in contrast to the limited production, high-dollar versions from earlier in history. After Ford made a splash with the Thunderbird sports car, Chevrolet sought to capture its share of the growing market with the 1955 introduction of the Corvette.

The Corvette, whose distinctive appearance was brought to light by famous designer Harley Earl, was a beautiful package containing a ho-hum gift. The car had a two-speed automatic transmission and a standard Chevy 6 cylinder engine. Sales stagnated.

A Russian immigrant and Chevrolet designer named Zora Arkus-Duntov took the reigns of the Corvette project after its second lackluster year. He redesigned the new Chevy V8 to fit in the Corvette and replaced the automatic transmission with a sportier 3-speed manual tranny. His design changes vaulted the Corvette to fame and admiration.

Arkus-Duntov continued his affiliation with Corvette, ushering it into its heyday as the most respected and admired American sports car.

John DeLorean

A brash young auto executive at Pontiac named John DeLorean had an idea. He could take the under performing Pontiac Tempest, make a few minor exterior alterations, outfit it with a big and powerful V8 engine and upgrade some of the other components. His revitalization effort turned the lowly Tempest into the Pontiac GTO--the car that sparked the muscle car era in America.

DeLorean's efforts to build better and more interesting sports cars continued as he opened his own auto company. He introduced the stainless steel DMC-12 sports car later popularized in the *Back to the Future* movies. The innovative vehicle was never a hot-seller but was an inspiration for countless future designs from other automakers.

The controversial DeLorean was plotting an economy-priced plastic sports car that was never released. He passed away while the vehicle idea was still in its infancy.

Sports car enthusiasts remember cars. They can tell you the specs of many significant sports cars and can trace the history of many sports car lines. It's important to remember these cars did not materialize from thin air. There were men behind the cars who brought them to the limelight. Three of the great innovators--Winton, Arkus-Dontav, and DeLorean deserve to be as remembered as any sports car to ever hit the road.

Dan Tanna's 1957 Thunderbird: A Sports Car Icon

If you think about the popular 1970s television hit Vega\$, you probably have a distinct image in your mind. It's dark and the lights from the strip are reflecting off the brilliant paint job on detective Dan Tanna's 1957 Thunderbird. Few television cars have become as famous as Robert Urich's 1957 T-Bird.

The car's immense popularity was summed up by the show's human star, Robert Urich, himself. He noted that the Thunderbird received more fan mail than he ever did. Although Urich was surely exaggerating, that he felt the need to comment at all is testament to the popularity of the T-bird.

Through the show's sixty-seven episodes (including the original pilot movie and two two-hour specials), only two actual Thunderbirds were involved in filming. Both were nearly identical 1957 models, but one was in better condition than the other. This "show car" was used for close ups and scenes where the car needed to look top-notch.

The other car was slightly modified and "souped up" and was used for bigger shots involving movement. Considering the program's longevity and the frequent use of the vehicles, it is amazing that only two Ford Thunderbirds were used. Literally hundreds of Dodge Chargers, for instance, were demolished during the Dukes of Hazzard television program's run. Even mellow Jim Rockford necessitated a new car every year to keep the Rockford Files rolling.

One of the production staff from the original television later purchased the 1957 Thunderbirds and still maintains the popular sports cars. The story of their acquisition is particularly interesting. The two Vega\$ cars had been commandeered by a movie studio and were repainted an aquamarine color. They were to be used as background items in the Richard Gere film Breathless. When the current owner found them, he may have saved them from destruction in the Gere flick.

Tanna's T-bird was a television staple, immediately recognized by millions and inextricably linked to the television show. Even after all these years, the mere mention of Vega\$ brings to mind Urich's Dan Tanna talking on what now seems like a wildly oversized car telephone as he worked the Las Vegas streets.

There were other popular sports cars on television during the same era. Jim Rockford's gold Firebird was very well known, and the Starsky and Hutch Gran Torino with its red and white

paint scheme was immensely popular, too. The 1957 Ford Thunderbird from Vega\$ ranks right up with these other television automotive icons and is probably the most immediately recognizable true sports car in television history, with the possible exception of the Corvette from the 1960s program Route 66.

The Mercer Raceabout: The First American Sports Car

Chevrolet has claimed the Corvette is "America's first sports car," but that dubious claim can certainly be debunked by a quick look at American automotive history. Sports cars of many sorts existed prior to the Corvette. One of the most significant came into being before the First World War. Produced in New Jersey, the Mercer Raceabout has as good a claim as any on the title of American's first sports car.

The Mercer's T-head engine allowed it to reach breakneck speeds of nearly eighty miles per hour. This was no small feat in that era of poor road conditions. Those who have had the opportunity to drive restored Mercers have maintained that it drives as well as most modern cars, with the exception of the antiquated breaking system.

Mercers originally appeared around 1910 and were hand-built by a team of artisans in New Jersey. Costs were prohibitive, and Mercer's customer base consisted solely of wealthy men interested in experimenting with the new technology of the automobile. They were certainly impressed with what they discovered.

In 1911, the Mercer Raceabout was entered in six races--a considerable number considering the paucity of events at the time. It won five of them. Despite its massive success, the Raceabout's best days still lied ahead.

In 1914, the Raceabout won the prestigious American Grand Prize race, a 403-mile test of the world's finest automobiles. Beating British and other competitors, the Raceabout and its driver, Eddie Pullen, were welcomed home with a parade celebrating the small manufacturer's success.

Mercers disappeared by 1925 following a series of unfortunate staffing events and racing accidents. Although the company only produced sports cars for fifteen years, it left an indelible mark on the American sports car scene.

Today, the Raceabouts are a coveted prize among in-the-know car collectors. A model from the 1910s can fetch over \$300,000, a testament to its lasting popularity and historical significance.

We tend to think of sports cars in terms of the two seaters that hit mass production after the conclusion of World War II. But the forefathers of modern sports cars--cars like the Mercers that performed and succeeded before World War I "shouldn't" be neglected. One can argue whether or not Mercer deserves the title of America's first sports car over some other manufacturers, but one cannot dispute that it was one of America's most successful early forays into the sports car world.

Five Unforgettable Movie Sports Cars

Actors always get their names in the credits, but cars rarely do. Nonetheless, there have been many films that featured scene-stealing sports cars that probably deserved to have their make and model mentioned as the movie ended. Though there are undoubtedly countless examples of great movie sports cars, at least five truly stand out.

Alfa Romeo from The Graduate

Dustin Hoffman may have been told that the future was in plastics, but he relied on the metal of an Alfa Romeo graduation gift to get him to the church just in time to stop that wedding. The cherry red Alfa Romeo with the personalized plates played a key role in the classic film. It was featured in multiple scenes and was used in the most critical moments of the movie. Everyone remembers the shot of the befuddled kid taken from under the leg of Mrs. Robinson. But everyone remembers that little car, too.

XB Falcon from Mad Max

If you are going to have to patrol a post-apocalyptic Australian wasteland in a car, you might as well do it in style. Mel Gibson, as Mad Max, did just that in the popular movie trilogy's first installment. Zipping across what was left of civilization in a 1974 XB Falcon V8 interceptor, Mad Max was a formidable foe to those villains who survived the nuclear war. Although it was as road-weary and beat up as one would expect in such a dire situation, the XB Falcon still cut a stunning silhouette as it crossed what was left of the land down under.

Astin Martin from Goldfinger and Thunderball

If asked to name a British sports car producer, most Americans will say "Astin Martin." That's directly attributable to James Bond. Sure, having Sean Connery as James Bond behind the wheel is likely to make any sports car look cool, but the Astin Martin DB5 used in the films would have looked great even without Q's notable upgrades.

The Astin Martin was as much a character as Bond or either of his nemeses in the two films and remains a popular icon today. In fact, its popularity remained so high that the original used in the films, described by one of its owners as "the most popular car in the world" was actually stolen by a would be agent from a Boca Raton, Florida, airport in 1997.

Delorean DMC-12 from Back to the Future

Even without its time-traveling capabilities and mad scientist owner, the stainless steel DMC-12 was hard to forget. The gull-winged innovator never sold as well as its creator, John Delorean, had hoped, but it certainly became an American icon after its appearance in the Back to the Future films. The successful movie franchise and the DMC-12 have become inseparable in the public's mind. One cannot talk of the movies without making mention to the car Christopher Lloyd built to go back in time.

Mustang from Bullitt

Steve McQueen is still regarded in some circles as the king of cool, and Bullitt is still remembered for its incomparable chase scenes through the hilly roads of San Francisco. McQueen took the famous romp in a 1968 Mustang GT390. That Mustang is still regarded as one of the best built in the franchise's history and will long be remembered for its breath-taking maneuvers in one of America's most interesting-to-drive cities. The car's popularity actually led Ford to name a Mustang produced over thirty years after McQueen's wild ride the "Bullitt."

It's not uncommon to find movies featuring cars. The chase scene is an almost ubiquitous feature in modern film, after all. Occasionally, however, cars become a part of the movie. When a key role is given to a vehicle and the movie is a gem, the sports car can become unforgettable. Whether rescuing women from unwanted weddings or giving chase over Frisco hills, some sports cars have had movie roles worthy of Oscars.

Five Unforgettable Television Sports Cars from the 1970s

Throughout the 1970s, television programs (particularly hour long action/dramas) often featured heroes with enviable sports cars. Though not every car was particularly memorable or essential to the show's personality, some television sports cars did manage to leave a lasting impression. Here are five truly unforgettable television sports cars from the 1970s:

Dan Tanna's 1957 Thunderbird from Vega\$

In the pilot for this popular seventies cop show, the show's protagonist, Dan Tanna drove a bright yellow Corvette. Somewhere along the way the car was destroyed in the desert and Robert Urich's character ended up with a bright red 1957 Thunderbird convertible. The T-Bird was, in essence, the co-star of Vega\$.

Urich commented that the sports car received more fan mail than he did. The show aired 67 episodes and through the entire production, only two of the 1957 Thunderbirds were used. The cars later appeared, painted an aquamarine hue, in the Richard Gere movie, Breathless. One cannot think of Vega\$ without thinking of Tanna in his T-Bird cruising down the strip.

Jim Rockford's Firebird Esprit from The Rockford Files

James Garner gave chase to villains in a series of gold Firebird Esprit's during the course of The Rockford Files seven-year run. In addition to being Rockford's most recognizable accessory, the Firebird was also a moving printing press.

Always the clever detective, Rockford kept a small printing machine in the back to produce custom business cards to help him in his adventures. Over the course of the series, multiple model years of the gold Firebird Esprit were used. Despite the money problems that always seemed to evidence themselves on Rockford's answering machine, he was able to buy new Firebirds regularly.

Joe Mannix's custom Oldsmobile Toronado from Mannix

Though Joe Mannix began his crime-fighting career in the 1960s, the hour-long drama bearing his name survived into the 1970s. His customized 425 1966 front-wheel drive convertible Oldsmobile Toronado featured a slew of high-tech advances including a short-waver radio receiver and a hidden compartment that often housed his sidearm. The Mannix roadster wasn't the only car used by Mike Connors during the show--in the later seasons he got behind the wheel of an assortment of vehicles--but it was certainly the most memorable ride from the series.

Columbo's Rusty Peugeot from Columbo

One could argue whether rumpiled detective Frank Columbo's rusty old 1959 Peugeot 403 Grande Luxe Cabriolet really qualifies as a sports car. Even if it does in principle, it didn't in terms of apparent performance. The chewed up old rust-bucket was a perfect companion to the equally disheveled detective played by Peter Falk in the popular 1970s detective series. Interestingly the Peugeot was later sold to a couple in Ohio who were located by network execs when the series was revised in the form of a few television movies in the late 1980s.

Starsky's and Hutch's Gran Torino from Starsky and Hutch

The Ford Gran Torino from Starsky and Hutch was such a big star that its red and white paint scheme and styling actually became part of the Ford product line. Even today, S&H Torino owners gather to display their souped up Gran Torinos and to revel in memories of a popular 1970s cop show. In terms of sheer recognizability, the S&H Gran Torino is in a class of its own.

You might remember Ironsides' ride or what Kojak toiled around in. Perhaps you can recall Quincy's car, too. But when most people are asked to discuss cars popularized in 1970s television, odds are they will mention at least a few of the top five listed above. These cars became stars in their own right, often nearly overshadowing their human co-stars.

How the Corvette Revolutionized the Sports Car Industry

Harley Earl was an automobile design expert at Chevrolet who noticed the influx of small European sports cars into the United States after World War II. He knew there was a market for a two-seat roadster and convinced Chevrolet to introduce their own version: The Chevrolet Corvette.

In 1953, the first Corvette's were unveiled. The cars were unique in their construction. Instead of the steel bodies common for the time, the Corvette was actually built from a much lighter material--fiberglass. This innovation, combined with its Earl-designed appearance, however, was still not enough to make the car an overnight success.

At the time, Chevrolet was known for producing inexpensive, but unexciting vehicles. The Corvette, despite its sex styling and innovative construction was "just another Chevy" at heart, and lacked the performance sports car enthusiasts craved.

The original Corvettes featured a less-than-impressive V6, a two-speed automatic transmission, and a brake system taken directly from the regular Chevy line. In essence, the original Corvette was a sports car in appearance alone. Sales lagged and there was even talk of discontinuing Earl's pet project after a few years.

Sales were simply too low. Although the fiberglass design wowed potential buyers and critics within the sports car industry and the appearance of the Corvette was beyond reproach, the car simply lacked the kind of performance those searching for a true sports car expected to find.

Then came Zora Arkus-Duntov. The Russian immigrant and engineer found a home at Chevrolet, and a project in the Corvette. In 1955, Chevrolet introduced its first V8 engine. Arkus-Duntov redesigned the V8 especially for the Corvette and placed the bigger, more powerful motor into the small-bodied car.

He also replaced the old two-speed "powerglide" automatic with a 3-speed manual transmission. Suddenly the Corvette was no longer just a pretty face. The Corvette became a legitimate competitor for the other major U.S. sports car, Ford's Thunderbird, and its popularity soared dramatically. Arkus-Duntov is often considered the father of the Corvette due to his line-saving alterations.

Over fifty years later, Corvette remains a leading name in sports cars and is currently offering its sixth generation of products, including a rumored high performance model known as the Blue Demon.

The Corvette is now known as the "poor man's super car" and is noted for its relative affordability and impressive reliability records.

But before there was a Blue Demon, a Z06, or any of the Corvette C classes that sports car enthusiasts love today, there was Harley Earl and a cute design with a V6 they called the Corvette. Chevrolet embraced the idea of a truly American sports car, and with the help of a Russian immigrant built one of the most popular and lasting sports car labels in the world.

John Delorean's Impact on the Sports Car World

John Delorean is now best remembered for his failed gull-winged stainless steel car that became a time-travel device in the highly successful "Back to the Future" series of films. He is also associated with shady financial dealings and illegal narcotics operations. A symbol of the 1980s excess, the recently departed Delorean's legacy seems anything but glorious. When one reflects on Delorean, they likely remember footage of him attempting to raise funds for his failing auto company by trying to sell over twenty million dollars in illegal drugs.

A more carefully use at the automotive innovator, however, cements Delorean's status as a true legend in the sports car field. Without the Delorean touch, it is likely that sports car production and history would have taken a different direction than it has.

It was Delorean, who in 1964, helped create the muscle car movement in the United States when he decided the tired Pontiac Tempest could be revived via the insertion of a massive V8 engine. The resultant GTO became, and remains, one of the most beloved muscle cars in history. The GTO, or "goat" as sports car enthusiasts often term it, became a hot-seller for Pontiac and set off a chain of events that led to the muscle car era in the United States.

Delorean was rewarded for his innovative thinking by promotions into the highest ranks of American automobile executives. Despite his success in the industry, he eventually opted to go his own way, leaving the U.S. automakers behind and hoping to subsequently compete with them.

Though Delorean's efforts in Detroit created the muscle car era of high-performance, big-engine sports sedans, his true desire was to take his automotive notions even further. He left Detroit and started his own manufacturing efforts in Northern Ireland, aspiring to build a company that would compete with Detroit's big three.

The Delorean Motor Company produced the DMC-12, a brushed stainless steel sports car with a futuristic look and trademark flip-up doors. It was never a major seller and less than 9,000 of the famed Delorean DMC-12s ever hit the streets. Nonetheless, experts credit the "Back to the Future" car as a design inspiration for many makes and models to follow from other manufacturers.

Some have compared Delorean's story with DMC to that of Tucker automobiles. Both were headed by strong individuals with new ideas, both met significant resistance from existing manufacturers, and both introduced aesthetic and mechanical refinements that would later be adopted in the production of future automobiles.

Delorean's business success, including hotel investments and NFL football franchise ownership, was remarkable. His fall from grace, however, was even more amazing. Accusations of financial wrongdoings, allegations of cocaine trafficking, and bankruptcy followed and combined to decimate the Delorean empire.

Delorean announced in 1999 that he hoped to re-enter the sports car industry and hinted that he had plans to produce a fast sports car made primarily of plastic that would cost less than \$20,000 retail. Considering his success three decades earlier with the GTO, Delorean's announcement was met with a great deal of interest. He seemed poised for a comeback. His dream of a readily accessible sports car designed to fit any budget, however, was never realized. Delorean died in 2004.

It may be easy to look at the Delorean story and see only greed, excess and subsequent failure. A closer look at the man who built the DMC-12, however, reveals one of the sports car industry's biggest influences and a man whose legacy should include consideration of his remarkable achievements alongside his very public failings.

Is the Shiny Red Sports Car a Thing of the Past?

When one thinks of a new sports car, they may conjure up a mental image of a sleek, low-slung, curve-hugging engineering marvel. Quite often, that image is painted bright red. From "Little Red Corvette" to the pervasive (yet untrue) urban legend that red cars cost more to insure, the public seems captivated by the notion of a red sports car.

So, it would certainly not surprise anyone if I were to tell you the most popular color for small cars and sports cars is red. However, if I were to tell you that, I would be lying.

The DuPont Automotive Color survey tracks color popularity among new car purchases annually. Interestingly, the results from both 2003 and 2004 show red is not the most popular color for sports cars.

20% of new sports cars purchased in both 2003 and 2004 were silver in color, making that the most popular color choice.

Red sports cars, however, still retain a great deal of popularity. In both surveys, red sports cars were the second most commonly purchased. 16% of sports car purchases in 2003, and 17% in 2004 were painted red.

That's still a significant percentage of the total market, but it is surprising to realize that red sports cars make up less than one-fifth of the total purchased in the United States in any given year.

Black and blue sports cars are right on the heels of their red counterparts. Each accounted for 14% of sales according to the extensive DuPont survey.

While we continue to associate the idea of new sports cars with a bright red, shiny paintjob, the statistics show that association is not quite in line with car buying reality. Although still a very popular paint scheme for new sports autos, red is not the most popular hue for hot-rodders.

Hybrid Sports Cars on the Way

When one thinks of hybrid automobiles, the image of subcompact economy cars--high on gas mileage and low on top-end performance--undoubtedly comes to mind. However, with gas prices consistently increasing over time, occasionally in sudden spikes, and environmental awareness growing in all quarters, there is a movement afoot to bring hybrid technology into the realm of high-performance sports cars.

Japanese automakers, in particular, seem to be expending a great deal of effort in fusing hybrid technology with sports car appearance and performance. The Subaru Scrambler, the Mazda Ibuki and Mitsubishi's hybrid in its Eclipse line are all progressing in development.

Most of the hybrid research and development currently focuses on adopting the most common hybrid production methods. Lithium batteries and electric motors join forces with top-notch engineering. Preliminary reports indicate that at least one 470 horsepower sports car is under design by a leading Japanese manufacturer.

In addition to hybrid sports car working from the same general principles of their better-known economy car brethren, hydrogen-burning sports cars are also under investigation. Many years ago, Mazda discovered their rotary engine performed exceptionally well while using lean-burning hydrogen as a fuel source. Since that time, Mazda has continued to tinker with this revolutionary methodology in hopes of eventually producing an environmentally friendly sports car that maintains high performance standards.

The most visible hybrid sports car, however, is the Toyota Priapus. A conventional gas/electric hybrid, the Priapus lists at over \$70,000. It will be hard for owners of this hybrid sports car to recoup the additional cost in fuel savings, but the automobile is increasing in popularity. Experts predict the limited-production hybrid sports car will perform well in auctions, with car enthusiasts likely to be willing to spend into six figures to procure the low-to-the ground, futuristic Toyota offering--and with good reason. The Priapus boasts zero to sixty mile per hour acceleration in just under four seconds while maintaining an impressive 30 miles per gallon in terms of fuel efficiency.

The Japanese are not the only automakers to spend time and resources plumbing the realm of hybrid sports cars. Two former Jaguar designers are making headlines in England with the development of a V10 hybrid that has recently been awarded significant capital in the form of government grants to bring the concept car into the general marketplace.

With many nations' fuel efficiency standards demanding better fuel economy in the future, gas prices spiking again and again, and a general consensus developing that hybrid technology can reduce pollution and perhaps stem global warming trends, there is no doubt that hybrid automobile research and production will continue to accelerate.

Those who were worried the automotive icon that is the sports car would vanish somewhere along the way as the green movement gathered force can take heart in recent developments. All indicators point toward a greener, more fuel-efficient future featuring jaw-dropping high-performance cars sure to please even the most discriminating sports automotive enthusiasts. As long as there are cars, it seems, there will be those who demand impressively speedy, sporty automobiles and manufacturers are not willing to let go of that purchasing base as they explore hybrid alternatives to traditional internal combustion autos.

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